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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary words frequently used in the media and popular literature can be taught by using a modified foreign language laboratory method whereby the students are introduced to the words aurally. First the students are read a concocted paragraph that incorporates the new vocabulary. This is followed by repetition in which the paragraph or dialogue is read several times with pauses at crucial phrases. After this aural exposure to the lesson, students receive dittoed copies of the paragraph and see the printed words. Oral drills begin next. Class members choose partners and ask and answer questions about the paragraph, using the vocabulary words again and again but shifting them to other contexts. Supplementing this is the study of Latin and Greek prefixes, roots and suffixes to aid the retention of lesson words. Students are then asked to undertake innovative projects that illustrate the meanings of the words. Finally, each student records the vocabulary words found in magazines, newspapers, and books. Log entries include the original context, acknowledgement of source, the dictionary definition, and the original sentence illustrating the word's correct use and meaning. (HOD)

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# WORD POWER: VITAL TO THE 1980's

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Students of the 1980's will need word power. To be inept with words is to be limited. Edwin Newman, in A Civil Tongue[1] and Strictly Speaking,[2] insists that if words are devalued, so are ideas and human beings (Newman, Strictly Speaking, p. 74). In a recent text, E. Hanushek analyzed various teacher attributes and placed verbal ability far above academic degrees or years of teaching experience as a factor affecting the achievement levels of students.[3] Other writers warn, "In America it is primarily differences in vocabulary which reveal differences in education,"[4] and "If your vocabulary is limited, your chances of success are limited."[5] While the truth of such statements is debated in current periodicals, teachers and students can assume that acquiring an appreciation for words is harmless at least. But before a prudent teacher broaches the subject of a course in vocabulary, certain verities must be admitted: (1) Students often blanch at the unknown. A sage has sworn that humans will cling to a known evil rather than reach out for an unknown good. Could this "paling before the new" explain students' fondness for comfortable words like "thing" and "very," despite our endless admonitions? Less familiar words like "disparity," "anomaly," "cryptic," "caustic," seem to students suspect and untouchable. (2) Students crave novelty. Injudiciously, they

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[1]Edwin Newman, A Civil Tongue (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, Co., 1976).

[2]Edwin Newman, Strictly Speaking (New York: Bobbs Merrill Co., Inc., 1974.)

[3]E. Hanushek, "Teacher Characteristics and Gains in Student Achievement: Estimation using Micro Data," reprinted in Intermediate Microeconomics, edited by Walter Nicholson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), pp. 153-154.

[4]Morton J. Cronin, Vocabulary 1000 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1969), p. ix.

[5]Wilfred Funk and Norman Lewis, 30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1979), p. 3.

seem galled by our word lists, jaded by our clever cross-word puzzles, filled with ennui by our best prefix-root-suffix drills.

Teachers, having faced the verities, though ruing the milieu that has fostered them, must forge ahead with (a) vital words for study, (b) fresh if not flamboyant methods for presenting words in class, and (c) wily ploys for selling them to students. The 1980's are upon us, with word power crucial for America's youth.

The notion of what words to study varies with different groups. Scholarly students favor arcane words like "pellucid," meaning "easy to understand," and "piscine," meaning "pertaining to fish." Their aim is to hold words over the heads of their peers. Students with esoteric interests enjoy such choices, but composition teachers quip, "Try 'to, two, too' or maybe 'their, there.'" Literature teachers long for readers who know words like "irony," analogy," even "wit." Scores of standard texts prescribe what words to teach, and the principal may opt for the text of which he has 34 copies on a storeroom shelf. I hold that teachers should be left to their own devices to determine which of our 650,000 to one million English words to stress. For my course, I refer in part to a study of vocabulary contributions of the content fields, by Robert A. Pavlik.[6] This study, using Roget's eight categories of words for his Thesaurus, shows that 52% of the words biology majors encounter in their reading belong to the category "matter." Few of the words in English majors' reading fall in that class. Of psychology majors' subject matter, 32% of words come from the class labeled "Volition;" of English, only 11%. The largest number of words for our majors, 60%, fall in the category "Intellect." Journalism majors find 78%

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[6] Vocabulary Contributions of the Content Fields, Reading-Writing in the Content Fields Program, University of Northern Colorado, 1978.

of their words under "Intellect." Second highest category of words for English majors is "Affections," with 26%. Since I design my course for language arts majors, I emphasize words from Roget's groups labeled "The Formation and Communication of Ideas" and "Words for Affections -- Personal, Sympathetic, and Moral," and choose, for example, from the category "Intellect," subcategory "Equivocalness," words like "ambiguous, equivocal, dissemble." High school teachers can do the same for classes with students planning language-arts careers. For those more general in nature, teachers can cover more categories.

To this core of words, we can add those of high frequency in the media and in popular literature, insuring the immediacy of our offerings. I found "inadvertent" in Dr. Deborah Phillips' self-help sweeper of the year, How To Fall Out of Love, the teen-agers' favorite,[7] in a sentence citing dire measures for one who inadvertently confronts his lost love. "Inadvertent" appeared four times in the media during the week I read the book, twice on editorial pages. I added it to the list. Similarly, I found "improvident" in the still popular Alive, describing the rashness of improvident survivors who smoked all their cigarettes the first day after the crash. When "improvident" appeared in a TV news-critique of a Jody Powell news session, as well as in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the daily news, I included it. Finally, annoyed that students on whose compositions I make marginal comments of "succinct," "cogent," or "vapid," ask whether I am commending or denouncing them, I joined these words to the others. In this

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[7] Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978, p. 25.

fashion, teachers' lists will burgeon with words keyed to students' interests and selected for currency.

With currency of material insuring a decided edge, canny teachers will stay out front in efforts for student word-power with fresh methods of instruction. I start by admitting that my tried and true techniques may be hackneyed: jolted, I abandon them and try a new approach. I ask my students to imitate a child's learning process of hearing words spoken in context before seeing them in print, tackling words which heretofore held only hazy meaning or were totally unfamiliar. The method is similar to that of students learning a second language. The class becomes a foreign-language laboratory; the method is new only in its application to native speakers learning words in their own language. (Indeed, English, judging from some student compositions, seems a foreign language.)

With modified laboratory methods, I read to my class a concocted paragraph about Horace, a fictitious student who malingers: his trick knee and bad back act up when his roomie mentions cleaning the oven or vacuuming the floor. Students grasp meaning from context: Horace resorts to chicanery by putting his parking tickets on his roommate's windshield. Doing his laundry only once a year, he's either a hopeless slob or, more likely, cost of soap being high, frugal or penurious. We focus upon Horace's scurillous language as he coarsely insults the Girl Scouts. Sentences are sometimes redundant in order to reinforce meanings: Horace's scurrilous use of words is abusive. A misanthrope, Horace has an inchoate plan to blow up Turner Hall. Students know through context that the plan is in the beginning stage only, not fully formed, -- hence, inchoate. Or, absorbed in a paragraph about Mrs. Blimp's wanton daughter Egetha, students simulate gasps at Egetha's arrogantly reckless behavior and firm up their concept of "wanton."

They become familiar with different forms of the same word through context: Egetha's wanton indulgence of her passions worries her mother; but Egetha behaves wantonly, ignoring propriety. More foibles of Egetha pack worlds into a dialogue:

"That girl! she races around at a frenetic pace from one tete-a-tete to another!

"Yes, she ought to slow down, stay cool!"

"Well, of course, I'm older, but I find her behavior insufferably sophomoric! It's so immature!"

Constructing these paragraphs is pleasant work; the more word-oriented and imaginative students help and surpass my efforts.

As in a foreign-language laboratory, repetition is essential. As I read the paragraph or dialogue, we pause at crucial phrases. Students repeat "frenetic pace -- racing and rushing," "scurrilous language -- insults the Girl Scouts," as we meet each vocabulary word, to pin word to concept as well as to get the feel of the words. After this aural exposure to the lesson, students receive dittoed copies and see the printed word. Oral drills begin. Class members choose partners, ask and answer questions about the paragraph, using the vocabulary words again and again, beginning with situations in the paragraph but shifting to other contexts:

QUESTION: Does reckless Egetha's wanton behavior worry her mother?

ANSWER: Of course her wantonness bothers her mother!

QUESTION: Was the willful jailer accused of wanton cruelty?

ANSWER: Yes, the paper said he'd lose his job for treating the prisoners so wantonly.

For more drill, students write questions on slips of paper with a blank in place of the vocabulary word, put the word on the back of the slip, circulate slips round-robin fashion, and in pairs ask and answer each question, filling in blanks orally from context-clues, looking at back of slips only when stumped. After slips have made the rounds, I collect them for a quiz and read them aloud. Achievement on quizzes is high. My records show that the more repetition in context, the more completely the words become the students' own. With this laboratory approach, repetition seems less boring than with other techniques.

Supplementing this method, at times I use the traditional approach to word study, Latin and Greek prefixes, roots, suffixes, to aid retention of lesson words. "Supercilious" is readily associated with "haughty" when one learns that the Latin prefix and root mean "lifted eyebrow." (The older sister lifts her eyebrows at Egetha in a supercilious stare!) "Improvident" ("im" = not, "pro" = before, "vid" = see) suggests shortsightedness or rashness. (Horace is not so improvident as to implement his plan without care! Also, to aid retention, students undertake innovative projects. One student associated words with meanings through illustrative, taped phrases of music. Students listened to measures of Rimsky-Korsakoff's "Flight of the Bumble Bee" to reinforce the meaning of "assiduous," to phrases from Moussorgsky's "The Polish Oxcart," from Pictures at an Exhibition, to experience the meaning of "ponderous." Other carefully selected musical phrases tied concepts to words like "macabre, erratic, pommel, effervescent, sensuous." Another student explained meanings through cartoons: Snoopy, examining a supposedly-ill Lucy by pressing a spoon against her extended tongue, showed Lucy to be a "malingerer." Snoopy, gazing longingly at Woodstock's ornate chandelier in

his newly-acquired lodgings, fixed Woodstock as a "parvenu." Such creative presentations provide contrast to heavier sessions of etymology. And, instead of making me the "performer" that today's students seem to demand, the projects place the onus upon them.

Finally, perhaps unfortunately, even with a full deck (choice words and fresh methods) we must sell our course to students if we want a full house. To convince the wary that today's writers use our lesson-words in fiction, texts, media, we need ploys. One is the word log. Each student records words he finds in magazines, newspapers, books. His log entry includes original context, acknowledgement of source, dictionary definition, and original sentence illustrating the word's correct use and meaning. I request 100 words for the term; students bring more and voice dismay at their accessibility. They seem astonished to find their log entries duplicate the words studied in class. As for the original sentences, I check them in conferences and find a shocking number of students misusing newly acquired nouns as adjectives, adjectives as adverbs, or exhibiting other grammatical confusion. One student, with full source-sentence for "banal" from a TV Guide issue, wrote: The typist hated her job typing index cards hour after hour because of "banal." Another, having unearthed "insouciant" in a Rocky Mountain News sentence, "The mass media, heretofore drowsily insouciant about what soon will be . . . ." wrote, "Mary put on an air of insouciant when she met Robert Redford." To use the newly acquired words accurately requires much practice and the teacher's patient assistance. The word log gives opportunity for both.

Besides selling our course-words as "unbiquitous," as one student phrased it, -- "as ubiquitous as the Pizza Parlors of America," -- the word log's end result, the highest value accruing from this search for words, is that students become sensitive to the printed word. Some express chagrin

at having skipped over words for years, blocking them out, missing rich meaning in reading. Rationalizing, they blame all of us who in the past supposedly told them, "Always skip over big words so long as you get the general drift of the passage." Their feeling of chagrin lessens during the term as, with our help, they discover the power of language.

A vocabulary course in the 1980's? With vital words, novel approaches, and shrewd contrivance, we can bring the suspect and the unfamiliar in the way of language into the classroom and help students reach out for the unknown good.

ABSTRACT

The 1980's will prove word-power crucial for America's youth. Teachers with vital words, novel approaches, and shrewd salesmanship can help students discover the power of language. For a new approach to word-study, teachers can modify foreign-language laboratory techniques. To sell word-study to students, teachers can use the media, non-fiction, and popular literature to demonstrate the currency of their materials. All should help students develop a sensitivity to language.